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C O N F I D E N T I A L ASUNCION 000008

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STATE FOR WHA/BSC MDASCHBACH AND LSALES

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [SCUL](#) [BL](#) [CU](#) [VZ](#) [PA](#)  
SUBJECT: PRESIDENT LUGO MISSTEPS ON CUBAN LITERACY PROGRAM

REF: ASUNCION 721

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires, a.i. Michael J. Fitzpatrick for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: President Lugo's pre-Christmas acceptance of Bolivian and Venezuelan assistance to implement a Cuban literacy program in Paraguay elicited a sharp negative, nationalistic reaction here. Even as it turns out that Paraguay has been using the modified Cuban system here since 2003, Lugo has spent much of the subsequent weeks downplaying the newness, size or nature of the program, and denying that he has agreed to permit any more foreign teachers in Paraguay. END SUMMARY.

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LUGO'S INTEREST IN "YES I CAN" DRAWS STRONG REACTION  
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¶2. (U) President Fernando Lugo visited Cochabamba, Bolivia December 20 by invitation from Bolivian President Evo Morales to attend an event to celebrate the implementation of the "Yes I Can" Cuban literacy program in Bolivia, and to witness the declaration of Bolivia as "free from illiteracy." Following Morales' statement there that he would help Paraguay "eradicate illiteracy," Lugo responded to press inquiries the next day that he "was very happy to receive Morales' generous offer to share the (program) with the Paraguayan people." (NOTE: In addition to Morales' offer, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez claimed December 20 that Paraguay had agreed to adopt the "Yes I Can" Program, and pledged Venezuelan assistance. END NOTE.)

¶3. (C) Lugo's December 21 statement elicited a sharp public reaction, and struck a nationalist chord with the Paraguayan press, politicians, civil society organizations -- and within his administration. Education Minister Horacio Galeano Perrone December 22 defended his Ministry's current efforts to fight illiteracy, calling Paraguayan teachers "excellent" and stating that Paraguay did not need assistance from foreign teachers. Vice Minister for Educational Development Luis Caceres Brun told EmbOff December 23 that Minister Galeano -- who did not accompany Lugo on his Bolivia trip -- was surprised by Lugo's statement, and noted that Lugo did not coordinate his trip or public statements with the Education Ministry.

¶4. (C) The Paraguayan press seized on statements made by Chavez and Morales to assert that, if implemented, the program would invite the Venezuelans, Bolivians, and Cubans to supplant Paraguayan educators and introduce Bolivarian socialism in Paraguayan schools. The press again linked "Yes I Can" to Venezuela December 31 when it reported that the Education Ministry had already begun implementing Venezuelan educational programs modeled after "Yes I Can." (NOTE: The press claimed that these Venezuelan programs are included in

the 13 agreements Paraguay and Venezuela signed August 16, and are administered by the Education Vice Minister for Youth Affairs, Karina Rodriguez -- a member of the leftist, pro-Chavez Paraguayan Movement Toward Socialism (P-MAS) (reftel). END NOTE.)

15. (C) Lugo dismissed allegations that he's too close to Morales and Chavez during a January 5 meeting with Charge, and told Charge that the program had existed in Paraguay "for years," was non-political, had an international stamp of approval, and focused here on Paraguayan-related topics. He noted that the program would not push Cuban or any other ideology, but emphasize Paraguayan military heroes and history, an explanation that prompted ABC Color owner Aldo Zuccolillo -- who published many articles critical of "Yes I Can" -- to offer Lugo a USD 500,000 financial donation to the "Yes I Can" program. Lugo said he had signed an agreement affirming that Paraguay would participate in the program but that no changes to the pre-existing program were planned. He denied that Paraguay would use any new foreign consultants to facilitate Paraguay's program.

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"YES I CAN": EDUCATIONAL... AND POLITICAL  
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16. (C) Education Vice Minister Caceres told EmbOff that the Ministry considers the "Yes I Can" program a useful educational tool, and said that many Paraguayan educators have actually used the "Yes I Can" program as a learning supplement since 2003. Some members of Congress, including Beloved Fatherland Party Deputy Sebastian Acha, criticized Lugo for not consulting Congress before adopting the program, and asserted that Congress would first need to approve it (like any other foreign cooperative agreement). Although Paraguayan teachers have endorsed the "Yes I Can" program, right-of-center civil society organizations such as the Freedom Foundation and the Rural Association of Paraguay are strongly opposed to its implementation.

17. (C) Caceres told EmbOff that while "Yes I Can" has been somewhat successful in reducing illiteracy, other programs -- including a home-grown bilingual Guarani-Spanish program -- have been more effective at promoting literacy. Former Education Minister Maria Ester Jimenez stated December 28 that Paraguay's own educational and literacy programs serve as a model for Latin America. She noted that Paraguay's Youth and Adult Basic Education and Literacy Program (Prodepa Ko'e Pyahu), established in 2000 and administered by over 4,000 bilingual Spanish and Guarani educators, has successfully taught 140,000 Paraguayans basic reading skills over the past five years. Ovelar said that Prodepa Ko'e Pyahu had been so successful that the Education Ministry submitted a request to UNESCO in 2007 asking it to analyze Paraguay's literacy rate and declare it "free of illiteracy." Caceres noted that Prodepa Ko'e Pyahu is supported by the "Donor's Roundtable," which includes the Spanish government, UN Development Program, and Organization of Iberoamerican States, European Union, and Inter-American Development Bank.

18. (C) Former Education Minister and 2008 Colorado Party presidential candidate Blanca Ovelar said December 26 that "Yes I Can" began in 2003 after then-Cuban President Fidel Castro gave Paraguayan writer Augusto Roa Bastos 65 "Yes I Can" kits for the Education Ministry. Ovelar said that the Ministry distributed these kits to students in Central Department with the assistance of then-Central Department Governor and now Vice President Federico Franco. (NOTE: Franco is center-right in his political views and strongly against those leftists courting President Lugo. END NOTE.) Ovelar noted that the prevalence of monolingual Guarani speakers and linguistic distinctions between Cuban and Paraguayan Spanish limited distribution of the Spanish-language "Yes I Can" kits.

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COMMENT  
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¶9. (C) Lugo stepped in it this time, yet it is still unclear just what were Lugo's original intentions with regards to "Yes I Can" in Paraguay. All the initial pronouncements were by Bolivians and Venezuelans speaking about extending the Cuban program to Paraguay. Lugo initially responded with not much other than, "Sure, we'll take the help." But the subsequent buzzsaw backlash has put the entire Lugo administration on notice that the Cuban-Venezuelan-Bolivian troika continues to be viewed with great suspicion here. As such, the Paraguayan government will find its maneuvering room on the left further limited. And those troika countries will likely try to make sure that future activities will try to fly under the radar.

¶10. (C) Although the Bolivians and Venezuelans could conceivably take advantage of the "Yes I Can" program to send "facilitators" or consultants to Paraguay with a political agenda, any political influence should be blunted by the country's overwhelmingly wary view of this initiative, and the success of Paraguay's Prodepa Ko'e Pyahu and other literacy programs already better adapted and positioned to reach large numbers of children who predominantly speak indigenous Guarani. END COMMENT.

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